



# Objectivity and truth in Ernst Cassirer's ethics

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## Abstract

Cassirer's view on ethical objectivity is puzzling. In his scarce comments on Kantian ethics, he defines the "pure will" as a "function of consciousness," which he considers a prerequisite for the possibility of objective ethical normativity embedded in empirical reality. In the existing body of literature, we find two different interpretations of Cassirer's account of ethical objectivity. The "meta-philosophical" interpretation takes objectivity as a telos that humanity gradually approaches, thereby emphasizing the historically relative truth standards to which the teleologically-evolving symbolic forms respond. The "Kantian" interpretation takes objectivity as a concept inherent to the conduct of the moral law, highlighting the evaluative and prescriptive aspects of his philosophical method. In this paper, I defend the thesis that, by interpreting Cassirer's ethics through the lens of Hermann Cohen's mature ethical theory, we can see that ethical deliberation in Cassirer involves a notion of universality that is a priori and depends on a substantiated concept susceptible to change. The proposed "contingent conception of universality" thesis accounts for both: the evaluative and teleological features of Cassirer's ethical theory, grounding an a priori account of ethical objectivity conceptualized relative to contingent truth standards that gradually improve.

**Keywords** Cassirer · Cohen · Philosophy of culture · Marburg school · Neo-Kantianism · Ethical critique of fascism · Ethical objectivity · Relativism · History of continental philosophy

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## 1 Introduction

Despite the growing interest in Ernst Cassirer's theoretical philosophy as of late,<sup>1</sup> Cassirer's view on ethical normativity—more precisely, his view on Kant's moral law—remains puzzling. Cassirer did not work out a moral theory, nor did he introduce morality as a symbolic form. However, in various instances across his writings, particularly in *Freedom and Form* and *Axel Hägerström*, there are numerous indications of Cassirer's preference for Kantian ethics. Moreover, in *The Myth of the State*, Cassirer adopts an ethical normative position, using it to emphasize the faults of fascist mysticism. Judged by his scarce comments on Kantian ethics, Cassirer appears to support the idea of the “pure will” as a “function” of consciousness.<sup>2</sup> He considers this a vital prerequisite for the feasibility of objective ethical normativity, encompassing a historically nuanced understanding of rationality. Cassirer discards the tacit presumption of the “existence” of formal laws, contending that “each function is inevitably represented in [empirical] ‘reality.’”<sup>3</sup> This embedded nature of rationality is also a key aspect of Cassirer's understanding of the pure will. “The function of the pure will cannot be thought of without its relation to the empirical object [...]. Moral doing [*das sittliche Tun*] is directed toward the world of observed objects, but they [empirical objects] do not define it [morality] in its true determinants. [It instead creates] concepts based on autonomy.”<sup>4</sup> In *Axel Hägerström* Cassirer continues to uphold significant systematic ideas from Kant's ethical theory, viewing them as manifestations of the “function” of ethical consciousness:

[T]he pure meaning of Kant's concept of duty and ethical autonomy can be peeled out and corrected without establishing it in the same way as Kant—by the distinction of the ‘mundus sensibilis’ from the ‘mundus intelligibilis.’ Here [...] a certain functional meaning of the basic ethical concepts remains, which is not bound to their metaphysical-substantial conceptual mantling.<sup>5</sup>

Cassirer embraces a functional interpretation of the moral law as realized in our practices, choosing a “dynamic” concept of rationality that is attuned to changes in form.<sup>6</sup> Presently, in scholarly discourse, there are two separate interpretations of Cassirer's functional approach to ethical normativity, each presenting a unique perspective on moral objectivity.

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Truwant (2022), Matherne (2021), Pollok and Filieri (2021), Endres (2020), Moss (2014), Luft (2015), Gordon (2010), Skidelsky (2008), Renz (2002), Ihmig (2001), Friedman (2000), Gay (1977), Schwemmer (1997).

<sup>2</sup> See Widmer (2023, pp. 80–96). To see how Cassirer employs the term “function” in various contexts, see Kinzel (2023). This paper concentrates exclusively on Cassirer's depiction of the pure will as a function within *moral* cognition.

<sup>3</sup> Cassirer (1918, p. 160, my translation). Anne Pollok (2015) has correctly highlighted that there is further depth to this thesis. She explains that representation is the foundation of meaning, as it is through mediated symbolic forms that we are able to create meaningful relations.

<sup>4</sup> Cassirer (1918, p. 160, my translation).

<sup>5</sup> Cassirer, (1939, p. 83).

<sup>6</sup> Luft (2015), see also Friedman (2000).

The “meta-philosophical” perspective contends that Cassirer’s approach to ethics should be seen as a process of “self-liberation.”<sup>7</sup> This viewpoint suggests that Cassirer’s deeper exploration into various forms of life illustrates our gradual movement towards an ideal of ethical autonomy, a goal we strive for but never fully achieve. Support for this view is found in passages like Cassirer’s assertion that “only very gradually the basic theoretical concepts of cognition [...] free themselves from their containment.”<sup>8</sup> Here, the philosophical reflection is seen as an ethical endeavor. As our cultural understanding evolves, we gain greater insight into our thought processes, leading us towards more ethical and liberating ways of living. Objectivity, in this view, is a historical endpoint we gradually reach through reflective deliberation.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, the “Kantian” interpretation posits that Cassirer utilizes the categorical imperative as a critical tool, offering normative discernment of right and wrong.<sup>10</sup> This reading finds support in texts like *Freedom and Form*, where Cassirer states: “In the concept of autonomy the inconsistency between two contradicting moments is annulled. Real freedom is directed toward the form of the law.”<sup>11</sup> According to this interpretative view, Cassirer views the Kantian moral law as a critical standard for assessing cultural forms,<sup>12</sup> and his focus on the history of culture is seen as an extension of Kant’s critical project.<sup>13</sup> Here, objectivity is rooted in the logic of the categorical imperative, which ethically reshapes the normative domain by providing guiding principles.

To reconcile Cassirer’s seemingly inconsistent ideas of objectivity, I introduce the “contingent universality” thesis. This thesis proposes that Cassirer’s ethical deliberation involves an evaluative a priori universality; however, since thinking is inherently conceptual, this universality relies on a historically informed concept relative to changing standards of truth. By interpreting Cassirer in relation to the Marburg School, I follow a common path in the literature to examine Cassirer’s view of ethical universality against the backdrop of his predecessor, Hermann Cohen.<sup>14</sup> Thus interpreted, Cassirer’s notion of ethical objectivity encompasses both an a priori universality, enabling objective ethical evaluations of developments and belief systems, and culturally relative moral truth standards, underscoring the teleological development of various conceptualizations of universality over time.

My argument unfolds as follows. First, I shall draw attention to Cohen’s account of functional objectivity and his relative notion of moral truth, demonstrating that we already find in Cohen a contingent conception of universality. Second, I shall

<sup>7</sup> Kinzel (2023), Truwant (2015), Luft (2015), Recki (2003).

<sup>8</sup> Cassirer (1925, p. xi). English translation in Cassirer (2021, p. xxx).

<sup>9</sup> Friedman (2000, pp. 99–101), Pollok (2021, pp. 17–18). Scholars have observed that this interpretation aligns closely with the Hegelian concept of rationality as a communal experience, woven through inherent contradictions that evolve into newly synthesized, more liberating ways of life, surpassing previous forms. For more detail, see Friedman (2000, pp. 99–101), and Pollok (2021, pp. 17–18).

<sup>10</sup> Gregory (2021), Lofts (2021).

<sup>11</sup> Cassirer (1918, p. 237, my translation).

<sup>12</sup> Gregory (2021, p. 181).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>14</sup> Luft (2015), Ferrari (2015, p. 12), Widmer (2023).

show that Cassirer integrates the idea in his account of ethical normativity. Third, to highlight the evaluative moment in Cassirer, I will pay special attention to *The Myth of the State*. Finally, I summarize the main points and suggest interpreting Cassirer's ethics in light of the notion of a contingent conception of universality that accounts for both an evaluative and a teleological account of ethical objectivity.

## 2 The contingent conception of universality in Hermann Cohen

Situating Cassirer within Marburg neo-Kantianism might run the danger of overly emphasizing transcendental logic, which may not fully encapsulate Cassirer's empirically embedded methodological approach. Because of this, Patton proposes situating Cassirer's "logic" rather in the context of nineteenth-century *Völkerpsychologie*, known for its emphasis on the tangible materialization of epistemic concepts that underpin cultural conditions, rather than in the Marburg school of neo-Kantianism.<sup>15</sup> However, while it is true that Cohen's earlier works on Kant focus mostly on the ahistorical elements of Kantian transcendental logic, his position would be vastly misunderstood if taken as an ahistorical position. Especially in his later ethical work, Cohen increasingly concentrates on the historical and psychological entanglements of knowledge.<sup>16</sup> Once we understand those entanglements in Cohen's ethics, we get a very good foundation to understand Cassirer. To this end, I aim to highlight Cohen's notion of universality that involves an ahistorical perspective on ethical objectivity as a cornerstone for evaluating cultural concepts, and the conceptual embodiment of universality that shapes the teleological progression of ethical rationality.

Cohen's perspective on the functional unity in ethics, as discussed in *Kant's Foundation of Ethics*, presents ethics as a branch of epistemology. This is not because he believes ethics follows the same logic as theoretical reasoning, but because he starts out with the "facts of culture," that are the factual norms that constitute our society, and epitomize in jurisprudence.<sup>17</sup> The task of ethics is to bring those factual norms into a "systematicity of ends."<sup>18</sup> On one hand, Cohen follows Kant: "No person is allowed to be used 'merely as a means.' Every person must always, at the same time, in the administration of the moral world, be treated as ends-in-themselves."<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, Cohen's reading of Kant's moral philosophy marks a significant departure from Kant's original ideas in two major respects. First, Cohen redirects the focus from an individual's introspection of personal principles to a broader examination of the moral validity of societal norms underpinning cultural practices. Second, he diverges from Kant's notion of external freedom, the foundation of legal norms,

<sup>15</sup> Patton (2021, p. 276).

<sup>16</sup> Widmer (2023).

<sup>17</sup> Cohen (1877, A16 B188).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., B298, my translation. Cohen's systematic philosophy has been described as a rationalist-idealist form of "constructivism" by various scholars, see Falkenburg (2020, p. 132), Luft (2015, p. 29).

<sup>19</sup> Cohen (1877, B279–80, my translation).

positioning normative reasoning within the moral law as an epistemological lens for understanding the moral justification of societal norms. He perceives the moral law not as a guide for individual actions but as a supervisory principle for societal governance. In his view, the core principle of the Formula of Humanity is interwoven into the teleological structure of the Formula of the Kingdom of Ends.<sup>20</sup> This approach is not about scrutinizing individual actions but about providing a framework for justifying societal norms, thus serving as an ideal for the moral institutionalization of norms that sculpt the social fabric.<sup>21</sup>

In *Ethics of the Pure Will*, Cohen criticizes sociological theories like Herbert Spencer's *The Social Organism* and Albert Schäffle's *Structure and Life of the Social Body* that understand their doing as a purely descriptive task. According to Cohen, the view of society as a "social organism" is problematic, as it neglects the significant role of ethical ideas in shaping culture.<sup>22</sup> Cohen believes that attributing cultural developments solely to natural causes overlooks the influence of ethical judgments in cultural evolution. Instead, he emphasizes the historical context of ethical decision-making, asserting that the concept of the "pure will" is shaped by historical circumstances. He posits, "There is no other will than the conditioned will. [...] Every will, every action is conditional. The condition is the soul, as of the judgment of knowledge, so of the judgment of the will."<sup>23</sup> In Cohen's mature thought, the "pure will," or the idea of systematic ends, doesn't manifest explicitly in the empirical world but exists as an ideal, discernible through established concepts, norms, and cultural practices.<sup>24</sup>

Cohen's exploration of the historically influenced concept of universality leads him to examine past conceptions of universality that have ethically molded culture. In order to trace the teleological development of practical reason, Cohen argues that his intention in *Religion of Reason*<sup>25</sup> is to examine materialized facts by studying

<sup>20</sup> Cohen (1877, A196 B224).

<sup>21</sup> Cohen (1877, p. 9).

<sup>22</sup> As I have noted somewhere else (2023), Cohen identifies deterministic trends in the German Idealist philosophies of Hegel and Schelling, noting their influence on sociological thought with their concept of society as an organism driven by human nature. Cohen's approach to idealistic historiography is frequently categorized as resembling "Kantian" or "Hegelian" philosophy, as observed by various scholars, e.g., Gibbs (2000), Willey (1978), Bienenstock (2012), Kim (2015), and Waszek (2018). However, Kant distances himself from a historical perspective based on ethics, arguing that empirical ends or inclinations cannot inherently possess moral form. In contrast, Hegel suggests that human inclinations can autonomously create or conform to moral law and possess rationality (Sedgwick 2001, p. 182). Cohen criticizes this view for diminishing the historical agent to mere "particular interests" (Cohen 1904, p. 33, my translation). Cohen's use of "naturalism" is broad, encompassing various perspectives such as historicism, naturalism, and materialism, which seek causal explanations for society's development (ibid., p. 41).

<sup>23</sup> Cohen (1877, p. 182, my translation).

<sup>24</sup> Cohen (1877, p. 182).

<sup>25</sup> The academic debate over whether Cohen's concept of rational religion represents a departure from his earlier systematic writings is controversial (Widmer 2023). Franz Rosenzweig first suggested that *Religion of Reason* signified a significant shift in his philosophical approach (Rosenzweig 1924, p. 140). While many scholars question the accuracy of Rosenzweig's claim (Poma 1997), some still believe that Cohen moved away from his previous systematic philosophy (Holzhey 2000, p. 51, Zank 2020, p. 2).

the normative foundation of cultures such as religious books and institutions.<sup>26</sup> He argues that the Jewish belief system played a key ethical role by introducing monotheism as a concept of universality at a time when polytheism, a relativistic belief system lacking systematic practical rules, was prevalent. Consider, for instance Homer's Agamemnon. Agamemnon faces conflicting directives from different gods. As the story goes, there is no objective means to discern right from wrong. In Cohen's view, it is characteristic for ancient polytheistic cultures to lack such objective measures. In contrast, the Jewish worldview was the first that overcame relativism. By introducing an idea of God, a coherent and systematic moral belief system was finally created. This system aimed for consistency in moral beliefs, anchored in the idea of God, representing a pre-critical notion of universality. In contrast to pagan traditions that anthropomorphized gods, the Judaist worldview introduced the notion of the absolute as a pure regulative *idea*.<sup>27</sup> Cohen acknowledges that the Tora still bears traces of ancient sacrificial laws [*Opfergesetzgebung*],<sup>28</sup> however, he underscores that those Jewish rituals underwent frequent reforms, shaping a harmonious set of principles under the concept of God. According to Cohen, Judaism introduced the concept of universality, paving the way for a logical, objective framework for moral principles that finds its full realization in the Kantian framework.

Let's have a more detailed look. Cohen emphasizes the presence of concepts within early Jewish thought that demonstrate an awareness of ethical principles. In his discussion of Fichte, Cohen focuses on the Jewish rule, "Love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." While "loving a stranger" is a maxim that cannot be universalized, Cohen notes that the concept of the "stranger" is an expression that—compared to the formal conception of an "end-in-itself"—still includes an understanding of the "I" and the "Other" based on observed differences.<sup>29</sup> The Kantian principle, "So act that you use humanity, whether in your person or the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means,"<sup>30</sup> is crucially different from the Jewish imperative to love the stranger. While the Jewish rule is based on a sensual feeling (love) and focuses on empirical differences (stranger), the Kantian principle abstracts from feelings and observed differences and finds its justification in the pure form of the will. Nevertheless, in premodern times, it was still an expression of the moral will that has not yet found its pure form. While the Kantian principle represents a more evolved state of consciousness, the formulation of the regulative concept of the absolute—"god" and the "end in itself"—both draw on an a priori understanding of universality that allows for an objective rendering of principles.

Equipped with the Kantian abstract notion of universality, Cohen examines practices evolving from worldviews from an ethical viewpoint. In discerning the ethical social life-forms from costumery rules, Cohen distinguishes in his examination

<sup>26</sup> Cohen (1919, pp. 3, 6).

<sup>27</sup> Cohen (1919, p. 399).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>29</sup> Cohen (1904, pp. 214–15).

<sup>30</sup> Kant (1785, AA p. 4:429). English translation in Kant (1997, p. 38).

between “symbolic” and “ethical” rules.<sup>31</sup> According to Cohen, symbolic practices like Jewish dietary laws are historically contingent customs with initial social purposes that have since lost their moral significance. In contrast, the imperative “to love strangers”—despite its lack of a non-empirical conceptualization of the human being—embodies a true moral intent, expressing the will-based “function” of novel social forms brought forward by the moral will.<sup>32</sup> We see here that Cohen makes use of the Kantian framework and the “systematicity of ends” to examine historical development of practical rationality in pre-Enlightenment times in which a formal understanding of universality is still lacking.

But Cohen does not only scrutinize our past; he also applies the philosophical framework to critique contemporary moral issues like capitalism. He views Kant as a pivotal figure in moving the nineteenth century away from a relativistic mindset characterized by materialism, historicism, and positivism. While he respects Marx, Cohen criticizes his failure to address the ethical-normative aspects of his theory,<sup>33</sup> stressing the importance of actions having an absolute end, where individuals are treated as ends in themselves, not merely as means or tools.<sup>34</sup> In this vein, Cohen identifies and criticizes social life forms that clash with Kant’s universality. He argues that labor laws in his time were more about sustaining capitalism than preserving human dignity, reducing people to mere means.<sup>35</sup> In this vein, Cohen calls for an ethical reevaluation of labor that is reflected in legal standards. His criticism of capitalism and advocacy for socialism are rooted in their inconsistency with the ethical concept of universality.

Cohen believes that while objectivity in ethics is ahistorical and formal, it also manifests materially in the concepts we use to label the notion of moral universality. As historical and epistemological contexts shape the actualization of ethical universality, universality is not only an a priori idea but also relies on its time-sensitive, conceptual realization. Cohen’s view of ethical objectivity combines a priori objectivity, which underpins the evaluative aspect of his method, with a historically contingent expression of universality that evolves towards abstraction.

### 3 Ernst Cassirer and the contingent conception of universality

In 1929, Cassirer gave a rectoral speech titled *Forms and Transformations of the Philosophical Concept of Truth*. In it, he argues that philosophy seeks unconditional truths. Yet, history would show that various paradigms deploy distinct truth standards. Cassirer argues that although we have conceptualized the conditions of knowledge differently, objectivity would not be exhausted by “extensive” criteria. What all currents have in common is their viewpoint on the “intensive” measures,

<sup>31</sup> Cohen (1919, p. 398).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 398.

<sup>33</sup> Widmer (2023).

<sup>34</sup> Cohen (1904, p. 321).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 322.

pointing to the “functional ideal of truth.”<sup>36</sup> In *Substance and Function*, we find Cassirer exploring the same idea. There, Cassirer claims that the “system of cognition does not tolerate any isolated ‘formal’ determination” that neglects that the forms of knowledge change alongside the ever-changing truth conditions.<sup>37</sup> Empiricism, historicism, and positivism would have realized this, however, with the misleading inference to exclusively focus on extensive criteria to explain knowledge: “They presuppose already a general knowledge of that ‘outside,’ which is to be derived here only.”<sup>38</sup> What seems like a delayed response to the materialism debate turns out to be a broader critique of any current prone to relativizing objectivity to temporal truth conditions.

Cassirer introduces a functional interpretation of the Kantian framework with the following example to accommodate both the changes of truth and the internal functional idea that makes knowledge possible: If we see an object, we can only notice some parts simultaneously. Thus, we are necessarily bound to a “perspective.”<sup>39</sup> But despite our limited access to things as they are, we inevitably create an idea of an object, allowing us to recognize the object even if we look at it from an entirely different angle. Cassirer posits that our ability to conceive a coherent and unified understanding of the world stems from a fundamental “law” ingrained in our consciousness. He argues that the formation of an object’s idea in our minds is contingent upon the presence of a rule, which imposes a specific order on each element, as he states: “We would not be able to produce the idea of an object, if not the idea of a rule would be added, by which a certain order [...] is assigned to each of them.”<sup>40</sup> However, despite the laws that govern our perception irrespective of temporal standards of truth, the conceptualization of objects depends on those truth standards. Think, for example, about the conceptualization of the sun. While the sun was considered a god-like entity at earlier stages of humanity, we nowadays conceptualize it as the central star of the solar system.<sup>41</sup> Although our perception is constituted by laws grounded in our consciousness, their “conceptual relations” are historically contingent aspects referring to the relative “order of knowledge” at a given time.<sup>42</sup> Like Cohen, Cassirer is not merely interested in the a priori conditions of truth; he pays attention to the ontological concepts we create due to the functions of consciousness and in relation to the temporal truth standards.

In this vein, he also renders the a priori idea of unity and the historical embeddedness of the pure will in functional terms. In *Freedom and Form*, Cassirer seems to echo Cohen when he writes, a “function of the pure will cannot be considered without its relation to the object.”<sup>43</sup> While the notions of right and wrong have

<sup>36</sup> Cassirer (1929, p. 357).

<sup>37</sup> Cassirer (1910, p. viii, my translation).

<sup>38</sup> Cassirer (1910, p. 253, my translation).

<sup>39</sup> Cassirer (1910, p. 312–313).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 312, my translation.

<sup>41</sup> For a more detailed conceptualization of god and religion in Cassirer and the influence of Rudolf Otto, see Pedersen (2008).

<sup>42</sup> Cassirer (1910, pp. 324–325, my translation).

<sup>43</sup> Cassirer (1918, p. 237, my translation).



undergone substantial changes throughout history, our culture exhibits pre-Kantian interpretations of freedom and universality that have fulfilled comparable roles.

Cassirer's interpretation of the unity of ends as "functional" finds an echo in *Axel Hägerström*. This approach views ethics as a type of cognition that generates legal or cultural facts, as Cassirer discusses.<sup>44</sup> Similar to Cohen's differentiation between "facts of science" and "facts of culture," Cassirer also assumes the existence of two separate forms of knowledge or cognition.<sup>45</sup> Theoretical cognition seeks the unification of perceptive content and scientific principles. Social cognition is based on an idea of unity, allowing us to picture the social world as it ought to be regulated. Because the concept of unity provides us with objective normative facts, Cassirer calls ethics a "scientific discipline."<sup>46</sup> Reminiscent of Cohen's ideas, Cassirer suggests that in the future, we might view certain contemporary moral teachings, often hailed as the pinnacle of wisdom, in a similar way to how we see alchemy in relation to chemistry or astrology compared to scientific astronomy. He implies that these teachings, currently esteemed, may eventually be regarded as rudimentary or misguided in their approach to ethical experience.<sup>47</sup> Cassirer criticizes that we would still find a problematic metaphysical distinction between the "mundus sensibilis" and the "mundus intelligibilis" in Kant; however, he is convinced that we are left with a "functional" meaning of Kant's "ethical basic concepts."<sup>48</sup>

In *An Essay on Man*, Cassirer draws from Bergson's concepts of "static religion" and "dynamic religion." He describes static religion as a result of societal pressure, while dynamic religion represents a break from traditional social ties in pursuit of autonomous ways of living.<sup>49</sup> Cassirer's discussion of dynamic religion appears to be influenced by Cohen, particularly in his analysis of the ethical role of monotheistic religions. He notes that polytheistic systems lacked the means to systematically discern right from wrong, whereas monotheism introduced the notion of an "absolute Divine," facilitating a systematic understanding of morality: "In the great monotheistic religions, we encounter a distinct aspect of the Divine, centered around the moral quandary of good and evil."<sup>50</sup> Unlike Cohen, Cassirer does not specifically differentiate between Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity, viewing all as ethical forces countering primitive mythology.<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless, he closely echoes Cohen's view that Greek religion was mired in "mythical indifference," while monotheism represents "not a product of mythical or aesthetic imagination," but "the expression of a strong personal moral will."<sup>52</sup> This latter form of religion, he argues, embodies a concept of universality that fosters a more liberated way of life:

<sup>44</sup> Cassirer (1939, p. 98).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>46</sup> Cassirer (1939, p. 63).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>48</sup> Cassirer (1939, p. 83).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116, see also Widmer (2023).

<sup>50</sup> Cassirer (1944, pp. 130–131, see also Widmer (2023).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 130–131.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131, see also Widmer (2023).

All the higher religions—the religion of the prophets of Israel, Zoroastrianism, Christianity—share a common goal. They alleviate the oppressive nature of taboo systems and uncover a deeper sense of religious duty, which, far from being restrictive or coercive, signifies a new, positive ideal of human freedom.<sup>53</sup>

While Cassirer does not elaborate on the philosophical underpinnings of his genealogical approach in *An Essay of Man* or *The Philosophy of the Symbolic Forms*, and his references to “human freedom” and “moral forces” remain somewhat abstract, there are indications that he adopts a Cohen-influenced functional interpretation of “human freedom” as the assumption of an inherent moral law or principle necessitating tangible expression.

First, Cassirer follows Cohen almost literally in his genealogical depiction of the early stages of monotheism. While Cassirer discusses a wide variety of religious belief systems, only those entailing a monotheistic conception of the absolute follow the ethical function of progressing toward human freedom. Second, the lack of discussion on morality as a symbolic form in Cassirer’s work can be coherently explained through a functional interpretation of the moral law. If we understand Cassirer as undertaking a genealogy from a normative point of view, grounded in his functional reading of the moral law, then the exclusion of “morality” as a secular symbolic form can be explained by his focus on pre-secular times when action-guiding norms were discussed in religious (instead of moral) terms.<sup>54</sup> Third, and most importantly, the assumption that Cassirer operates here with a Kantian-functional understanding of “human freedom” provides us with a coherent picture of his system as it matches his earlier comments on the functional interpretation of the moral law.

However, one objection remains. The evaluative and prospective function of the moral law is essential to Cohen’s foundation of ethical objectivity and moral truth. As I have shown with regard to Cohen’s critique of capitalism, we see that he takes the moral law in its normatively informative capacity to illuminate the direction we have to take if we are to progress. In *An Essay of Man* and the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, however, we find no such normative claims. Cassirer’s aim is to depict the past as a liberation process. Judged solely by these works, the meta-philosophical interpretation entailing post-factum deliberations would still be a legitimate reading. However, a different picture is drawn if we include Cassirer’s late political philosophy in *The Myth of the State*.

<sup>53</sup> Cassirer (1944, pp. 141–142).

<sup>54</sup> Apart from religion, Cassirer also discusses extensively the natural law tradition. He views Rousseau’s social contract as a reflection of Kant’s moral law in his work *The Problem of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. In *Vom Wesen und Werden des Naturrechts*, Cassirer interprets the development of natural law as a manifestation of a universal practical law. This concept is echoed in his writings on Axel Hägerström, where he notes that a “specific function” of the moral law is its expression through legal systems (Cassirer 1939, pp. 100–102). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer from *Continental Philosophy Review* for bringing attention to this aspect.

#### 4 Ethical evaluations in *The Myth of the State*

Cassirer approaches myth in two distinct ways. In his anthropological writings, he views myth as a unique form of human expression. Just as the sciences aim to unify thought, Cassirer argues that religion and myth fulfill a social function by fostering a sense of unity among individuals.<sup>55</sup> Contrary to views that dismiss mythical thinking as irrational, Cassirer defends it as a symbolic representation or “an objectification of man’s social experience.”<sup>56</sup> Exploring myth provides insights into the ontological progression of human knowledge, with Cassirer asserting that myth holds a fundamental place in shaping subsequent forms of understanding.<sup>57</sup> However, Cassirer also discusses the misuse of myth as a political tool, particularly in his work *The Myth of the State*. Here, he highlights the dangers of fascist myth, which deliberately undermines individual agency for manipulative purposes, exploiting remnants of mythical thinking even after its supposed transcendence. In his later political philosophy, Cassirer adopts a normatively engaged stance, aiming to critique cultural theories that contributed to the rise of fascism. He does not simply retrospectively analyze cultural progress, but actively condemns theories that paved the way for fascist ideologies.

Cassirer identifies several theorists whose ideas contributed to this harmful trajectory, including Carlyle, Gobineau, Hegel, and Heidegger. He critiques Carlyle for advocating the subordination of individuals, which Cassirer sees as a regression in human cultural development.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, he condemns Gobineau’s deterministic view of history, which erodes the notion the end-setting nature of humanity.<sup>59</sup> Even Hegel, whom Cassirer otherwise respects, is subject to criticism for his concept of the state, which Cassirer believes contains elements conducive to fascism.<sup>60</sup> Cassirer argues that the loss of agency is exacerbated in works like Heidegger’s philosophy of *Geworfenheit* and Spengler’s *Decline of the West* and which together provided the ideological foundation for National Socialism.<sup>61</sup> These ideologies, centered on the worship of power, heroes, and race, dismantle the idea of universality and ethical culture. Cassirer contends that while traditional myths are typically the result of unconscious processes, modern political myths are intentionally crafted by skillful propagandists.<sup>62</sup> In Cassirer’s lights, modern fascism represents a departure from the more advanced understanding of agency, self, and freedom established by Kant and the German Enlightenment. His normative critique echoes Cohen’s functional critique, underscoring the importance of autonomy and ethical culture in combating dangerous ideologies.

<sup>55</sup> Cassirer (1949, p. 39).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>57</sup> Pedersen (2023).

<sup>58</sup> Cassirer (1949, pp. 187–220).

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 221–228.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 284–288.

<sup>61</sup> Widmer (2023).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279, Widmer (2023).

As noted earlier, Cohen claims that Christianity did not sufficiently consider the rich Jewish concepts that came closer to a purely critical conceptualization than their Christian counterparts. The Paulinian-Christian belief system would mark a step backward in the evolution of moral reason as it re-implemented symbolic sacrificial rituals such as the “sacred wafer.” According to Cohen, the consumption of the body of Christ would resemble pagan sacrificial rituals, which were earlier already abandoned in Jewish thought due to a regulative understanding of God. Christianity would have thus re-integrated concepts that led to a regress in our ethical belief system.

Similarly, Cassirer’s genealogical treatise takes Kantian ethical autonomy not merely as a teleological ideal, informing us post-factum about the normative end of humanity, but as a substantive thought system with the function of critically evaluating intellectual movements.

These ideas [humanitarian and egalitarian principles of the German Enlightenment] were not based upon religion but upon a new type of philosophical ethics. They had found their most explicit systematic description in the work of Kant, the cornerstone of which was the idea of freedom—and freedom meant “autonomy.” That is the expression of the principle that the moral subject has to obey no rules other than those he gives to himself. Man is not only a means that may be used for external ends; he is himself the “legislator in the realm of the end.” That constitutes his true dignity, his prerogative above all mere physical being. [...] All this was not only entirely unintelligible to Gobineau but simply intolerable.<sup>63</sup>

Cassirer’s normative discussion of the re-establishment of mythical ideas shows that the Kantian notion of ethical unity is not merely a teleological principle we *noletns volens* approach. His discussion of Kantian ethics in *The Myth of the State* indicates that he takes Kantian ethics as a more advanced expression of ethical consciousness, which delivers the current conceptualization of the idea of universality, showing the wrongness of certain beliefs. Fascist ideology is wrong because it undermines the enlightened notion of human dignity.

## 5 Concluding summary

Cassirer deviates from Cohen in various respects. However, if we want to make sense of Cassirer’s account of ethical objectivity, which is ahistorical and evaluative as well as teleological and tied to relative truths at the same time, it is instructive to interpret Cassirer in light of his teacher, who introduced the idea of a contingent conception of ethical universality that can account for both.

I outlined two distinct ways in the current literature of understanding Cassirer’s account of ethical objectivity: the “meta-philosophical” and the “Kantian” interpretation. The former emphasizes Cassirer’s account of normativity as a self-liberation

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 231.

process, informing us descriptively about the end of humanity. This view emphasizes the relative truth standards in the evolution of symbolic forms, thereby implying a teleological account of objectivity. The latter emphasizes the normative information gained by the conduct of the Kantian moral law implicit in Cassirer's philosophical method, thereby taking objectivity to be rooted in the conduct of the moral law. I have shown that Cassirer, like Cohen, endorses a functional notion of ethical universality. This idea—which is sometimes expressed in the notion of “duty,” “autonomy,” or “law”—grounds the possibility of considering cultural norms in relation to the then-present contingent conceptualization of the idea of unity in the temporal nexus of culture. Having highlighted the contingent conceptualization of the idea of universality, my interpretative suggestion accounts for both: the teleological and the evaluative elements, grounding a functional and ahistorical account of ethical objectivity, which materializes in concepts that are bound to a culturally relative notion of truth. It is the contingent concept of universality that makes ethical evaluations possible and the relative conceptualization of this idea that marks the telos of rationality.

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